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ABSTRACT

Data from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) reveal that gains in performance for the African American student population of Region VII of the state's educational system were not keeping pace with the performance of African Americans in the rest of Texas. This study investigated practices in school districts in the region in which African Americans were performing at high levels on TAAS reading, writing, and mathematics in the hope that these successful practices can be replicated to improve African American student achievement. Three districts with approximately 35% African American student population were selected. In these districts, at least 50% of African Americans passed all sections of the TAAS. Data were gathered primarily through semistructured interviews. The study did not uncover specific revelations about the success of African Americans in these school districts. Instead, the study shows that success for all students results from a common pattern of actions that occur in a sequence. District leadership and decision making initiated changes that led to improved student performance. These districts had formal assessment procedures in place and had begun to align curriculum with the TAAS in mathematics and were beginning alignment in language arts. In these districts, the entire staff was involved in professional development. Formal and informal processes and procedures were used to monitor student achievement, and when improvement occurred, these districts celebrated their success. In the study districts, low-performing campus ratings prompted attention and action. Appendixes contain demographic and TAAS data, the interview questions, and an illustration of the findings in chart form. (Contains two figures.) (SLD)

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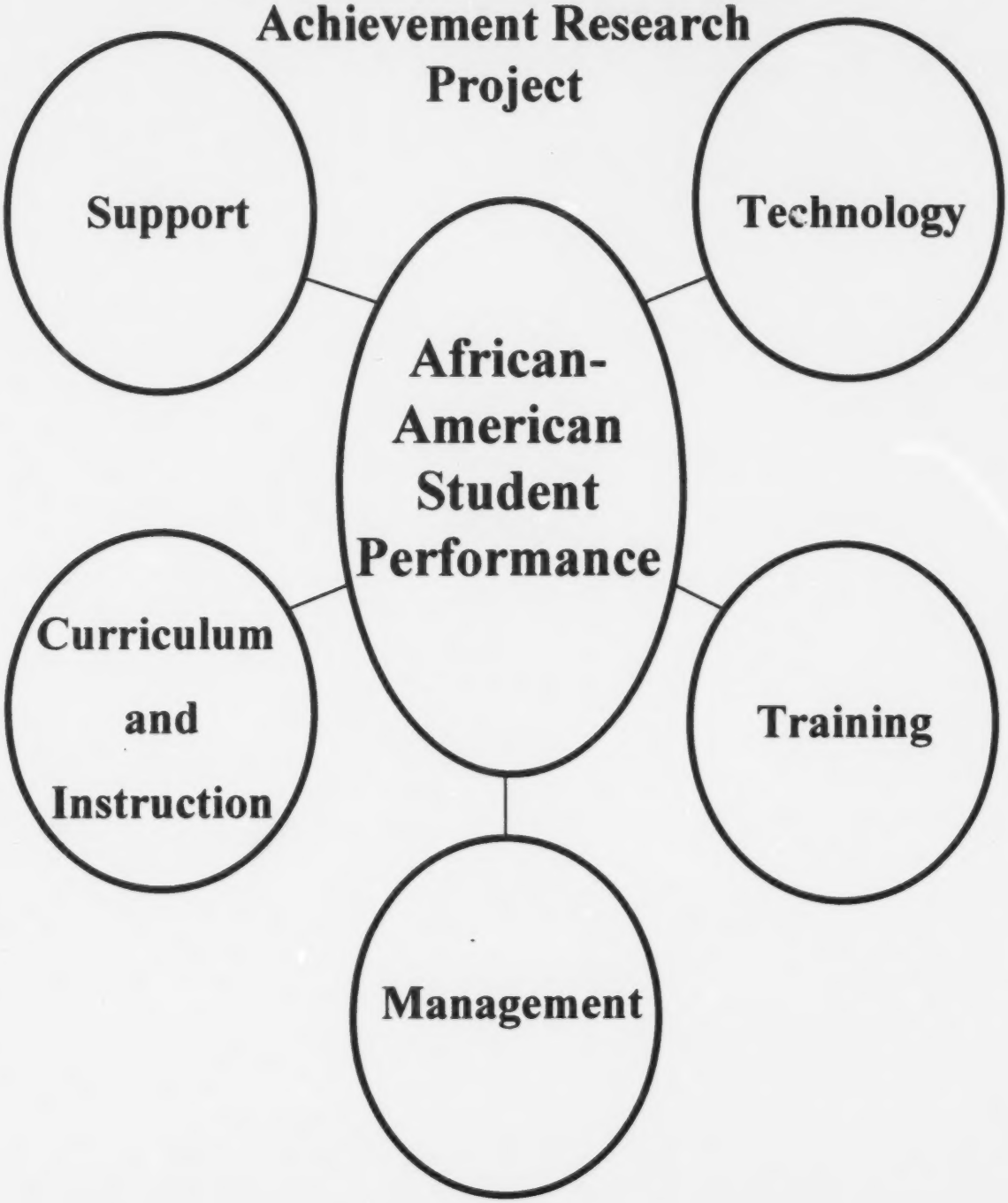

Our website: http://www.esc7.net

A

Research Project

conducted by

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We wish to express our appreciation to the school boards, administrators, staff, and students of North Forest I.S.D., Terrell I.S.D., and Corrigan-Camden I.S.D. for allowing us to conduct this research in their schools. The gracious hospitality that we received in each of these districts was a testament to the dedication of all of the educators involved. We have no doubt that continued success will follow these three school districts because of their commitment to making students their first priority.

Our gratitude is extended to all of those professionals who joined the team of researchers for this study. Region VII ESC consultants participating included Chris Little, Brenda Jarvis, Sonja Watson, Kathy Jones, and Dana Fleming. Chapel Hill I.S.D. personnel assisting with collection of data were Stanley Wooden, Principal, Dee Levens, Principal, Nancy Welch, Principal, and Kimbraly Brown, Asst. Principal. Participants from Jacksonville I.S.D. included Superintendent Jeff Turner and Curriculum Director Sherrye Dotson. These educators made it possible to assimilate large amounts of qualitative data in an effective and efficient manner. We appreciate the time and effort expended by these hard-working and dedicated professionals.

Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Eddie Little, Executive Director of Region VII ESC, Dr. Wayne Berryman, Deputy Director of Region VII ESC, Mrs. Billie Ogden, Director of Curriculum and Training for Region VII ESC, and Mr. Bob Hoffman, Director of Support Services for Region VII ESC, for supporting this research effort. In addition to financial and human resources, these individuals provided encouragement and were enthusiastic about the study. Their leadership helps us achieve greater goals.

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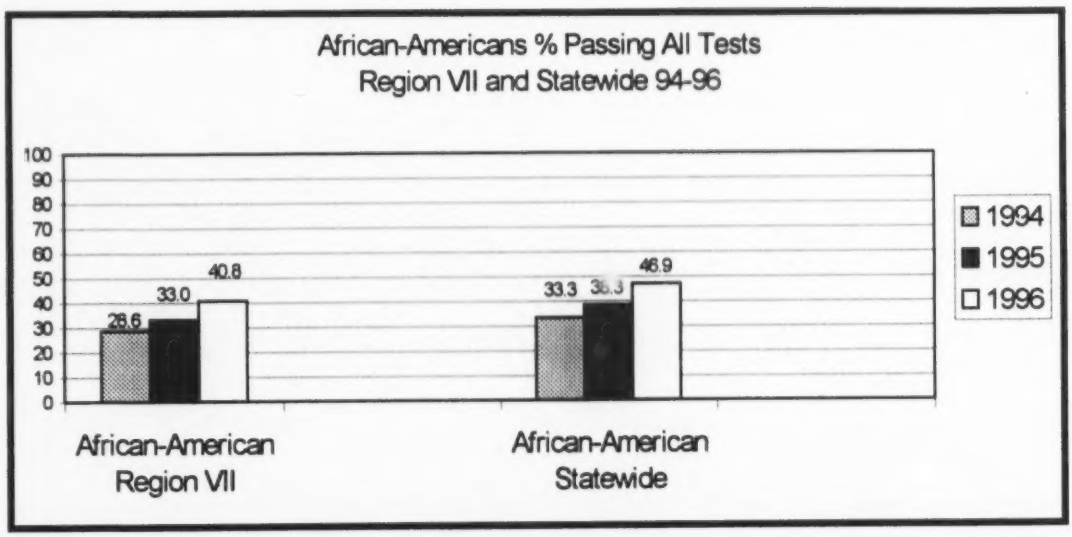
Study Design

Background

Review of three years of state and regional data from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills revealed that gains in performance for the African-American student population in Region VII were not keeping pace with this student population's performance in the rest of the state. Considerable gaps continue to exist in the performance of this population compared to other student populations (see figure 1). Region VII has experienced several low-performing campuses since the implementation of the state accountability system. Most of these campuses have been rated low-performing because of dropouts or because of African-American TAAS math scores.

Figure 1



Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate practices in school districts in which African-American students are performing at high levels in TAAS reading, writing, and mathematics. The information gathered will be shared by various means with schools in Region VII in hopes that successful practices can be replicated where appropriate in order to improve African-American student achievement.

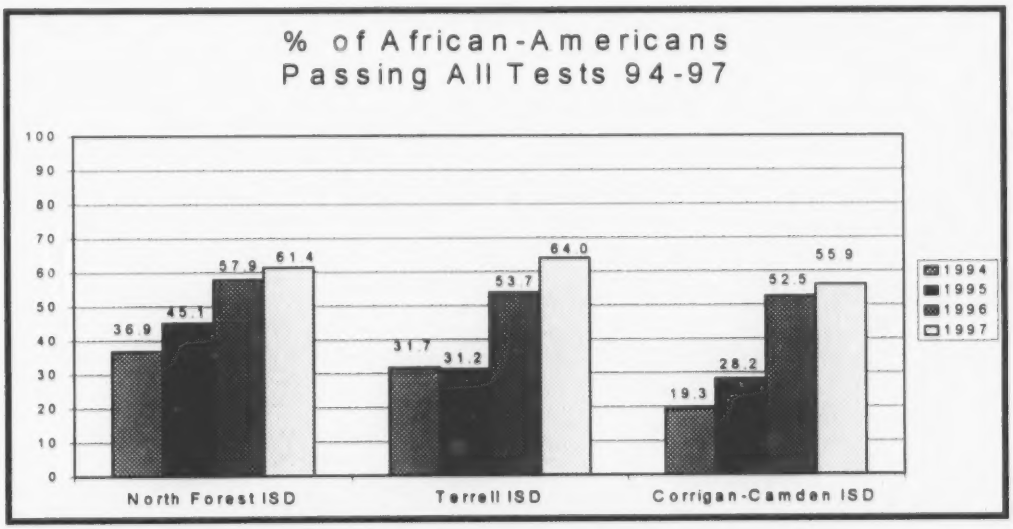
Participants

One important consideration in the study design is that the researchers wished to identify *districts* in which African American students are performing at high levels as measured by the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The study aims at identifying systemic practices that increase achievement throughout a school district. The purpose is to create a description of the larger picture.

Researchers used demographic data from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), performance data from the Micro-AEIS from the TAAS administrations of 1994-96, and performance data provided by the Texas Education Agency from the TAAS administration of 1997 in order to select research sites (see figure 2). To

identify high performing school districts, researchers set the demographic criterion of approximately 35% African American student population. The student performance criterion for this population was set at 50 % passing all three sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (reading, writing, and math). Three districts of varying sizes and locations were identified: North Forest, Terrell, and Corrigan-Camden. North Forest I. S. D., with two 5-A high schools is, located in the northeast Houston area. Their student population was 85.6% African American in 1995. The total student population was 13,450 in 1995. Terrell is a 4-A district located on highway 80 east of Dallas. Of Terrell's 3,389 students, 35.5% were African American. Corrigan-Camden is a 3-A district located on highway 59 south of Lufkin in the East Texas area. Twenty-nine and four-tenths percent of the district's 1,195 students were African American.

Figure 2



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Data Gathering

Research Team

A research team was assembled which consisted of Education Service Center personnel and school administrators from Region VII. School administrators including a superintendent, principals from elementary, middle, and high schools, and curriculum directors participated. The team was given information about the districts and briefed as to the purpose and details of the study. Each team contained at least one member who had received Texas School Improvement Initiative training.

Methods

Data was gathered principally through interviews of central office and campus personnel. A combination of the standardized, open-ended interview and the interview guide technique were used to develop the interviews. Questions were determined in brainstorming sessions by the research team. Questions were designed to gather information in the following categories: **curriculum, management, training, technology,** and **support.** Research team members were not limited to the predetermined questions; they were encouraged to probe when clarification was needed or when they felt more information was necessary (see Appendix B for more details concerning interview questions). Teams were briefed before entering

the district by the primary researcher. Teams debriefed after the first day of information gathering. The transcriptions of the interview data were read by an uninvolved third party and then debriefed by the primary researcher.

Validation of Findings

After data were gathered and analyzed, a report was drafted. A copy of this draft was mailed to all those who served on our research teams and to individuals in the three districts who participated in the study. This report was accompanied by a letter requesting that they review the findings and give feedback on what needed clarification. Individuals were asked to contact the primary researcher regarding inaccuracies. Several phone calls were received from individuals in the districts who desired clarification of some points, but all agreed as to the accuracy of the overall findings of the report.

Study Findings

The interview was the primary method of inquiry. Interviews were semi-structured in that the teams used a standard set of questions, but the questions were designed to be open-ended. Teams of interviewers visited a cross section of campuses and the central office in North Forest ISD in order to talk to personnel at all levels. In Terrell and in Corrigan-Camden, teams visited each campus in the district as well as the central office. The purpose

of the inquiries was to determine what types of management strategies, curriculum, training, technology, and central office support were responsible for the improvement in the performance of the African-American student population in these districts. Information from the three districts was compiled and compared in order to determine common practices in the areas of investigation as well as other factors that had impacted student performance.

Curriculum

District Control

Various similarities emerged in the area of curriculum. In two of the three districts, formal procedures had been put in place at the district level in order to ensure that the curriculum tested on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills was being taught in classrooms. These were the two largest of the three districts that participated in the study. The smallest district engaged in fewer formalized practices.

Data Analysis

All three districts had become data driven. Disaggregation of TAAS data was a universal practice among the districts studied. Administrators and teachers were aware of the performance data of their campus and

district. Of particular note, the districts were paying close attention to the performance of student groups for whose performance they were being held responsible by the state accountability system. They were also focusing closely on their performance on objectives tested on TAAS. Teachers were using this data to guide classroom instruction. Each of the districts had set timelines for teaching and testing student progress on the objectives.

Assessment

Each of the districts was incrementally assessing student progress toward mastery of the TAAS objectives. However, the frequency of testing varied. For example, one of the large districts tested students every three weeks on objectives specified by the district curriculum management plan. Another district only tested ninth graders once. In this district, a practice test was administered at the same time that the exit level test was administered to tenth graders. Teachers relied on the profiles produced by the eighth grade TAAS in order to design and deliver curriculum and instruction to meet these students' needs.

In all three districts teachers had performance profiles on individual students and were familiar with where each student was in regard to his or her performance on TAAS objectives. All three districts reported using student portfolios of which TAAS performance was a part. However,

teachers and administrators also stated that the uniformity of the contents and the use of these portfolios were somewhat inconsistent. Teachers said that they included different types of student work in the portfolios and that what they were supposed to include was not uniformly understood by the faculty. However, this did not affect their understanding of the progress their students were making on the mastery of targeted TAAS objectives.

Monitoring

Accountability and monitoring of teaching the TAAS objectives also seemed to be a key element in the improvement of student performance. As previously mentioned, one of the districts had a district curriculum management plan which mandated timelines for teaching TAAS objectives and for incremental assessment. In this district principals were required to spend a minimum of three hours per day observing classrooms to ensure that teachers were, indeed, following the plan. Principals were required to submit weekly reports indicating the amount of classroom monitoring time to central office. However, more than one principal indicated that they were having considerable difficulty in getting all the monitoring accomplished because there were too many other administrative demands on their time. There was some degree of variation from campus to campus as to the implementation of the management plan. The high school reported the least

compliance with the plan. Participants attributed this to changes in campus leadership.

Participants from the other large district also indicated that monitoring classrooms to ensure that teachers were teaching the TAAS objectives was a key element in improving student performance. In this district, central office personnel did considerable monitoring of classroom instruction. However, the campus leadership strongly supported the monitoring and assistance provided by the central office. Department heads as well as campus level administration were also involved.

Curriculum Alignment

All three districts were at various stages of aligning curriculum to TAAS. All three had begun with math because math was the most immediate need. Participants reported that they had had substantial training on disaggregation of data and curriculum alignment provided by central office and consultants.

Instructional Strategies

Interestingly, none of the district personnel reported using any instructional strategies that they believed were especially effective for African-American students. On the other hand, the improved performance of this student population seemed to have resulted from a variety of

research-based practices and beliefs. For example, in one of the districts, principals had to justify requests for funding of additional programs by supplying supporting research.

All three districts were finding ways to extend instructional time. For instance, one district was offering TAAS tutorials before school in which students were grouped according to their performance on specific targeted TAAS objectives. Teachers had profiles on these students, and the students received additional instruction and practice on the targeted objectives. Participants believed that the following instructional initiatives were making an impact on performance, but were insufficient in explaining improved results:

- peer tutors
- reading orally to students daily (elementary)
- use of math manipulatives
- teaching for mastery
- real books
- silent sustained reading

Training

The participants in the study indicated that the decisions as to the staff development selected were determined based on student needs as identified through needs assessment data. TAAS data was the primary consideration in these needs assessments. Participants also indicated that staff development was critical in enabling their districts to make changes in curriculum and instruction that resulted in improved student performance.

Participants reported that the involvement of administrators in training was a key to its implementation by teachers. This involvement made it possible for principals to understand the training and how it was to be implemented in the classroom. This knowledge and understanding then enabled principals and other administrators to monitor the implementation of the training by classroom teachers. Participants emphasized that the support of the principal was essential to school improvement efforts. On one campus, for example, the principal was not perceived to be a strong instructional leader, but he placed strong emphasis on the improvement efforts and strongly supported instructional support from the central office. Participants also emphasized the importance of monitoring. The words of

one principal seemed to best illustrate this concept, "What gets monitored gets done."

Participants from each district reported that another important staff development practice that made a difference in improving student performance was teachers teaching each other. This concept was used in several different ways. The "trainer of trainers" was one such model. In this model selected teachers received intense training provided by the central office and by other sources and returned to their campuses to train other teachers.

In another way, the concept was used to teach teachers how to address TAAS targets in their subject areas. For example, math teachers worked with science and vocational teachers on effective ways to teach percentages. English teachers shared knowledge of TAAS writing with social studies and science teachers so that they could integrate more TAAS related writing into those subject areas. Again principal support was critical in allowing for time and scheduling the training.

Participants in all three districts reported that training in understanding test data, such as the Texas Learning Index, was very beneficial. They also stated that training in how to use the TAAS item analysis was very important in identifying gaps in curriculum and

instruction. Consultants such as Shirley Crook, Gayle Fuller, and John Crane provided this training which included follow-ups. Also, participants from one district reported that training, such as "True Colors," was instrumental in enabling them to understand each other better, and, therefore, work better together.

Management

Perhaps the most important finding regarding the management of the three districts included in this study was that all participants reported a "no excuses" attitude. All categories of participants, from central office staff down to the classroom level, believed that all their students could and should meet and exceed state performance standards. Management from the top levels down to the classroom was goal directed and data driven. Teachers stated that they had to overcome the practice of citing excuses such as, " our students are poor, African-American, and from educationally disadvantaged homes." When this was accomplished, students began to make progress.

Again, a key element in management strategy was monitoring. Principals and central office staff regularly visited classrooms. Teachers knew that this was to be expected. However, teachers seemed to feel that this was supportive rather than threatening. Various teachers commented

that there was a "feeling of family" on the campuses and in the district. Collegial behavior was talked about and observed. For example, teachers exhibited knowledge of student performance data, of campus and district goals and objectives, and of the needs of students. Teachers talked about sharing ideas on how to address targeted TAAS objectives. Teachers were collaborating in various ways. For example, teachers were sharing information about how to teach targeted TAAS objectives across departmental boundaries in high schools. Also, high schools were organized in traditional departments: English, math, science, social studies, etc. Perhaps it should also be noted that some campuses were providing many incentives for students to pass the TAAS, such as drawings for bicycles, radios, etc.

An important finding in the area of management was that district level decisions made a critical difference in changing curriculum and instruction which led to improvement in student performance. That is, the board and superintendent mandated that performance on AEIS indicators had to be improved. At the time of this study, all the districts were involved in site-based decision making. However, the initiative for change came from the district leadership rather than from district or campus improvement committees. By the time our data gathering took place, each district and

campus committee was setting performance goals and objectives for the district or campus, respectively. Participants from the districts reported that they felt SBDM would help to sustain improvement in student performance. We also found that some of the critical attributes of SBDM such as collegiality, sharing of ideas, vertical communication, staff development, and high expectations were present in all three districts. All three districts were making the connection from performance data to staff development to classroom instructional practices.

Support

In each of the districts that participated in our study, the board of trustees played a significant role. Two of the three districts had experienced low performing campuses. The other district had narrowly escaped the designation of low performing. Each board mandated improvement in performance measured by the Academic Excellence Indicator System.

Participants at the campus level reported strong support from the central office. This support included providing training and resources. Teachers also reported strong support from campus administration. Teachers stated that campus administrators were supportive of district

improvement efforts and performance goals. Participants characterized parental support as "adequate."

Technology

On the whole, technology was not a factor in the improvement experienced by the districts that participated in the study. The only instructional technology that we observed on the campuses was antiquated computer labs on some campuses. The software available in the labs was not TAAS aligned. Furthermore, these labs seemed to be little used. However, one middle school was an exception to these general conditions. The principal and teachers of this middle school credited some of their improved student performance to their computer lab in which students practiced with up-to-date, TAAS aligned software. This software provided student tests in the TAAS format and tracked student progress. Central office staff of one of the districts indicated that they were using student performance data tracking and management software. Staff stated that this technology was invaluable in allowing them to provide accurate, timely information to all teachers in the district on student progress on the district's incremental testing program.

Other Results

The research teams included participants from two Region VII school districts in which there have been low performing high schools based on 1997 TAAS African-American math scores. As part of the validation process, these participants were mailed a draft copy of the study findings and asked to give feedback as to the accuracy of the report. Follow-up phone calls were made to contact these administrators in order to find out if their participation in the data gathering process had benefited them or their schools. They all reported that they had increased their knowledge base considerably in the area of assessment, curriculum, staff development, monitoring, and raising expectations. They also stated that they gained a clearer understanding of how high expectations for their African-American students can be realized. Both of the Region VII high schools that furnished participants in the data gathering effort raised their African-American TAAS math scores significantly in 1998. One high school's exit level scores increased from 24% passing in 1997 to 40% in 1998. The other high school improved from 29% in 1997 to 62% in 1998. An inference cannot be made based on these data that their participation in this research project is the direct cause of this improvement. However, individuals from those districts give considerable credit to the knowledge they gained in how to use

assessment, curriculum, staff development, monitoring, and raising expectations as a result of their participation for the improved performance.

Conclusion

The research uncovered no specific revelations contributing to the success of African American students in identified school districts, as measured by the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Instead, the study revealed that success for all students resulted from a common pattern of actions that occurred in a sequence:

- District leadership and decision making initiated changes that led to improved student performance.
- The districts had formal student assessment procedures in place that provided direction to instruction and curriculum decisions.
- The districts had begun curriculum alignment with TAAS mathematics and were in the process of aligning curriculum in language arts.
- The districts had involved the entire staff in professional development that was appropriate for improving students' skills in areas identified through data disaggregation.
- The districts had in place methods to ensure implementation of the staff development.

- The districts had both formal and informal processes and procedures to monitor the progress of students throughout the school year.
- The districts celebrated the success of improved student performance.

The research revealed that commitment from the board and the staff to accept no excuses regarding expectations for all students to meet state performance standards was a significant factor. School board support was essential to improvements exhibited by each district.

Districts included in this study made significant progress in improving student performance and in closing the performance gap for the African-American student population in a relatively short time. Low-performing campus ratings within the districts prompted focus and urgency. As a result, these districts were connecting assessment results with curriculum alignment, staff development, classroom implementation, and monitoring (see Appendix C for a graphic illustration of these findings).

Taken from *Snapshots '97*

North Forest ISD-Harris County

Total Students	5 Yr. % Changes in Total Students	% African-American	% Hispanic
13758	11.8	84	14
% White	% Other	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Special Education
1	0	64.8	5

Terrell ISD-Kaufman County

Total Students	5 Yr. % Changes in Total Students	% African-American	% Hispanic
3967	4.0	36	14
% White	% Other	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Special Education
50	1	46.7	16

Corrigan-Camden ISD-Polk County

Total Students	5 Yr. % Changes in Total Students	% African-American	% Hispanic
1181	-2.4	28	27
% White	% Other	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Special Education
44	0	66.6	18

For detailed student performance information, see the TEA website at the following: http://www.tea.state.tx.us

A

Interview Questions

Curriculum

1. Tell me how you are teaching reading? math?

2. Are these programs/strategies/philosophies consistent throughout the district or unique to this campus?

3. How do you align TAAS objectives with instruction?

4. How you address TAAS objectives? (alignment, integration, incremental assessment)

5. What interventions do you plan for students who are not performing?

6. How do you deal with students moving in and out of you school?

7. In what way do you think teacher expectations impact the performance of your students?

8. How do you assess student performance? (early diagnosis)

9. How do you communicate student performance vertically? (grade to grade, campus to campus)

10. How do you plan for curriculum continuity horizontally and vertically?

11. Could you explain your grading policy?

Management

12. Tell me about your SBDM process. (Budgeting, planning, curriculum, staffing patterns, school organization, staff development)

13. Describe your campus or district planning process. (Needs assessment, goals, objectives, timeline, resources, formative and summative evaluation strategies, actions, initiatives)

14. How often do you monitor the campus/district plan?

Training

15. What training have you had over the past 2-3 years that you feel has significantly increased your teachers' capacity to improve student performance?

16. What do you think caused your teachers to "buy in" to the training?

Interview Questions (Continued)

Technology

17. How do you think technology is impacting student performance?

18. Describe training related to technology that you feel impacted student performance.

Support

19. Describe the central office support.

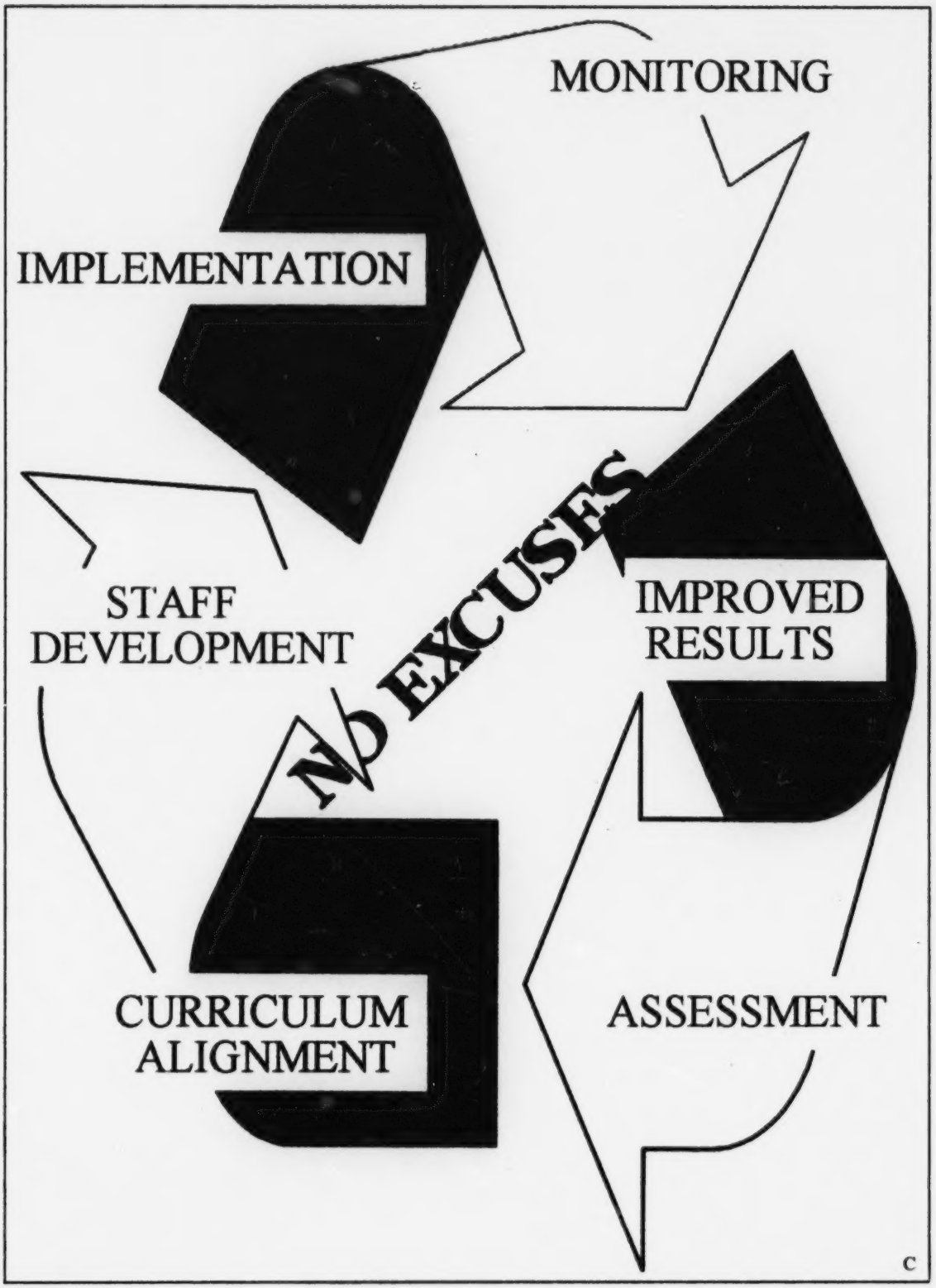
20. Describe the campus leadership support.

21. Describe parental support.

22. Describe special program support. (Title I, ESL, Bilingual, Special Education)

23. Describe school board support.

24. Describe business/community support.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